

## An Unlikely Hero: Roy Straitley

Roy Straitley is the unlikely hero of two novels by Joanne Harris: *Gentlemen and Players* (2005) and *Different Class* (2016). Both are psychological thrillers set in St Oswald's Grammar, a minor English private school with pretensions to grandeur, but dangerous, even murderous currents swirl under an apparently serene exterior. English social class is a major preoccupation of these two novels, and Harris intertwines class with Classics, since Latin is one major signifier of this magical, Harry Potter-esque place, functioning as Greek does in Tartt (1992), to denote elevated social class and detachment from ordinary life. But St Oswald's also exemplifies the ambivalent narrative about Latin familiar to many of us. While it can represent elevated social class and superior education, it is also simultaneously being squeezed out of the curriculum. These two conflicting narratives are entwined in the character of Roy Straitley. Straitley is the sole surviving Latin teacher after more than 30 years at St. Oswald's, presiding over a "modest empire" in the school's bell tower, from which he gets his nickname Quaz, for Quasimodo. He wears the same tweed jacket and gown every day, and cuts his own hair. He is a bachelor, a smoker, sedentary and overweight and on some days feels that his own mortality is imminent. Straitley is as beloved among his boys as Mr. Chips in Hilton (1934) and as ferociously intelligent and powerful a disciplinarian as Mr. King in Kipling's *Stalky and Co.* novels, notably "Regulus" (Kipling 1917), yet the often precarious position of Straitley and his subject at the school mirrors clearly the fortunes of Classics in the world beyond the two novels. Straitley is determinedly – some of us in similar situations might say foolishly - old-fashioned in his teaching and attitudes, and hostile forces from the school's administration, battling financial difficulties and parental dissatisfactions, are keen to send him and his

subject to the scrapheap in favour of more “relevant” subjects. Straitley frequently uses Latin tags, sometimes real quotations, sometimes amusing direct translations of English idiom to ridicule the (Latinless) administrators he despises or who threaten him, thus marking Latin as simultaneously the language of class and sophistication but also as the language of a kind of rebellion, marking, in a slightly mocking way, the initiated from the non-initiated, even as it is the uninitiated who actually have the power to get rid of it.

In both novels, it is Straitley’s intelligence and understanding of human nature that ultimately save him, his subject, and even the school from dangerous forces: he exemplifies a humanity and tolerance born of slight detachment and taking the long view, and Harris suggests that he has gained such a perspective from his long association with the ancient world as well as his long career as a teacher in which he has seen generations of boys and administrators come and go. Both books alternate between Straitley’s own narrative and those of unknown but deeply damaging and damaged voices who seek to destroy the school and everything that Straitley knows and loves. Through his own strength of intellect and character Straitley will prevail over them. This paper will explore the role of Latin and Classics more generally in the two novels and how Harris represents certain modern tropes about our subject, both for good and for ill, through the character of Roy Straitley.

#### Bibliography

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